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USSR: Gorbachev's Policy Toward Dissent and Emigration

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An Executive Summary

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An Executive Summary

This paper was prepared by Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Domestic Policy Division, SOVA,

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Key Judgments

Information available as of 4 January 1988 was used in this report.

Over the past year General Secretary Gorbachev has taken a number of positive steps—some quite dramatic—in the human rights area. Some of his early moves to resolve high-profile dissident cases were especially calculated to appeal to foreign audiences, and foreign policy considerations undoubtedly have been important in the decision to sharply increase the number of exit visas given to Jews. Gorbachev and his key advisers are keenly aware of the role public opinion plays in shaping Western policy and want to strip the United States of the human rights "weapon" in public diplomacy.

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Increasingly, however, domestic considerations appear paramount in Gorbachev's motivations. He evidently has come to believe that by bringing former critics into the mainstream he can win support from intellectuals and reform-minded elites and bring about a rapprochement between the party and the population—which he sees as necessary for maintaining the stability of the political system and revitalizing the economy. Moreover, he appears to believe that an end to "totalitarian" controls on information is necessary to foster the initiative and creativity on which scientific and technical progress depend. To date, his efforts have had some success in positively influencing foreign and domestic opinion.

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While these initiatives have given Soviet policy a new look, they do not provide the population with guaranteed civil liberties. Gorbachev's statements suggest he has no intention of relinquishing the party's role in determining what constitutes legitimate criticism but is interested in a controlled broadening of public discussion on topics that complement his overall reform program.

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The more flexible approach has posed new risks to the regime and provoked conservative criticism that has recently led to some backtracking. Released prisoners and many citizens who had not been politically active initially interpreted the relaxation of repression as an invitation to organize and press for more reform. Religious and national minorities have become emboldened to demonstrate for their rights, and unofficial groups and journals have proliferated, threatening the party's monopoly of political life. These developments have led to sharp public criticism by some of Gorbachev's conservative colleagues, notably "Second Secretary" Ligachev and KGB chief Chebrikov. Since last summer Gorbachev has apparently agreed to set narrower limits on dissent—either because of pressure from his peers or because he too is concerned the demonstrations could get out of hand.

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The upcoming revision of several laws affecting emigration and the limits of permissible dissent should provide some clues to the further evolution of Gorbachev's policies. Another indicator of future policy will be the regime's followup on its proposal to host an international conference on human rights in Moscow. Gorbachev's attempt to relax controls without opening a Pandora's box entails a difficult balancing act. We can probably expect to see additional fine-tuning and occasional swings of policy as he seeks to avoid either a conservative backlash or disillusionment of the liberal elite and Western public opinion.

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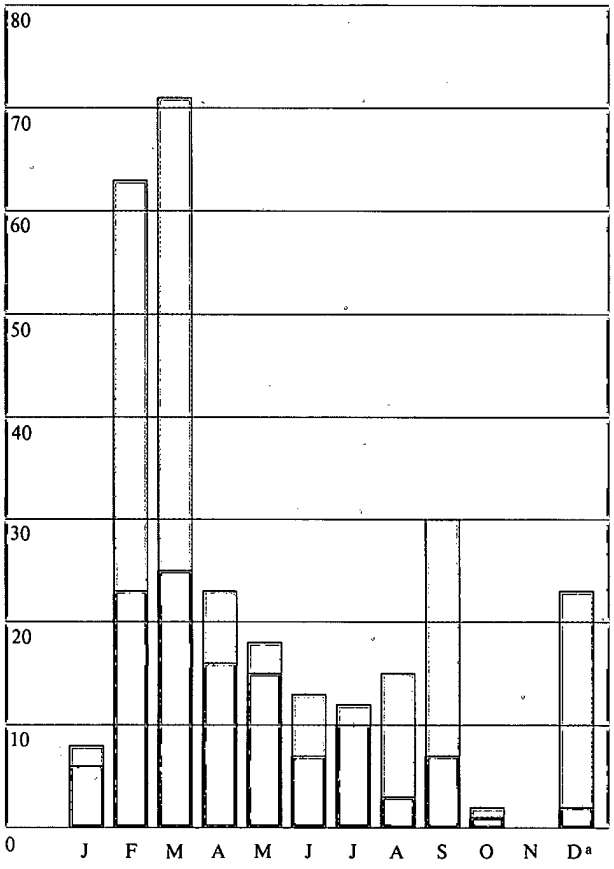
Policy Initiatives

Over the past year, General Secretary Gorbachev has taken major initiatives to relax repression of dissidents and to allow more emigration from the USSR. He has:

- Brought Andrey Sakharov back to Moscow and allowed him to express his views more freely.
- Pardoned over 275 political prisoners. The releases have included representatives of virtually all political and religious orientations and nationality groups (see figures 1 through 3).
- Authorized the review of several thousand long-standing refusenik cases. As a result over 7,000 Jews, 12,000 ethnic Germans, and 2,500 Armenians—mostly refuseniks—emigrated during the first 11 months of 1987. While a fraction of the emigration rates of the late 1970s, these figures represent more than an elevenfold increase over 1986 (see figure 4).
- Opened up discussion of the repeal or modification of several laws under which dissidents are commonly prosecuted. Several Soviet officials have claimed the regime intends to eliminate laws on anti-Soviet slander (article 190 of the RSFSR criminal code and its counterparts in the other republics) and significantly narrow laws on anti-Soviet propaganda (article 70 and its counterparts).
- Sanctioned media exposure of police abuses against ordinary citizens and the confinement of malcontents in psychiatric hospitals. In January 1988, the regime passed a new law to curtail such abuses.

These initiatives reflect a significant shift in the Soviet regime's treatment of human rights issues. Like his predecessors, Gorbachev is trying to eliminate the dissident problem, but he has dramatically

Figure 1
Release of Pardoned Prisoners in 1987



[a] Soviet representatives reported the release of over 20 prisoners during the Washington summit.

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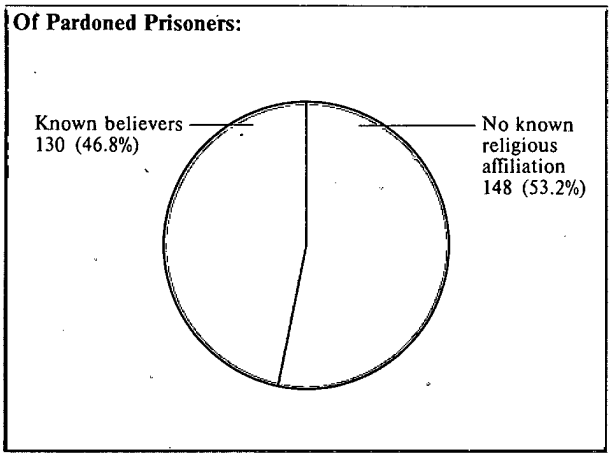
Figure 2
USSR: Religious Believers Among Political Prisoners Released in 1987



[a] "Other" includes one Moslem and two Armenian Apostolics.

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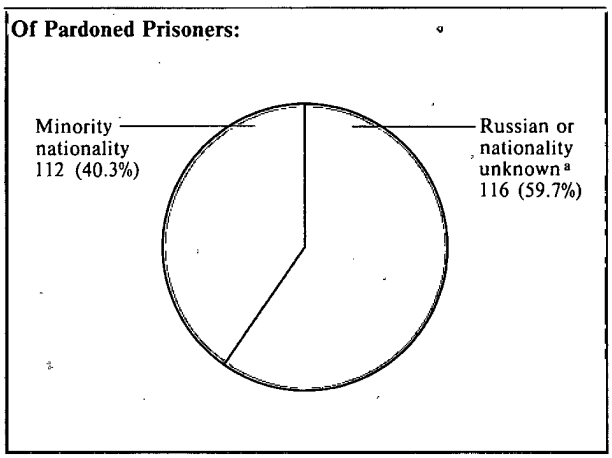
Figure 3
USSR: Nationality Distribution of Political Prisoners Released in 1987



[b] "Other" includes one Belorussian, one Bashkir, one Moldavian, two Tajiks, one Kazakh, and one unspecified Central Asian.

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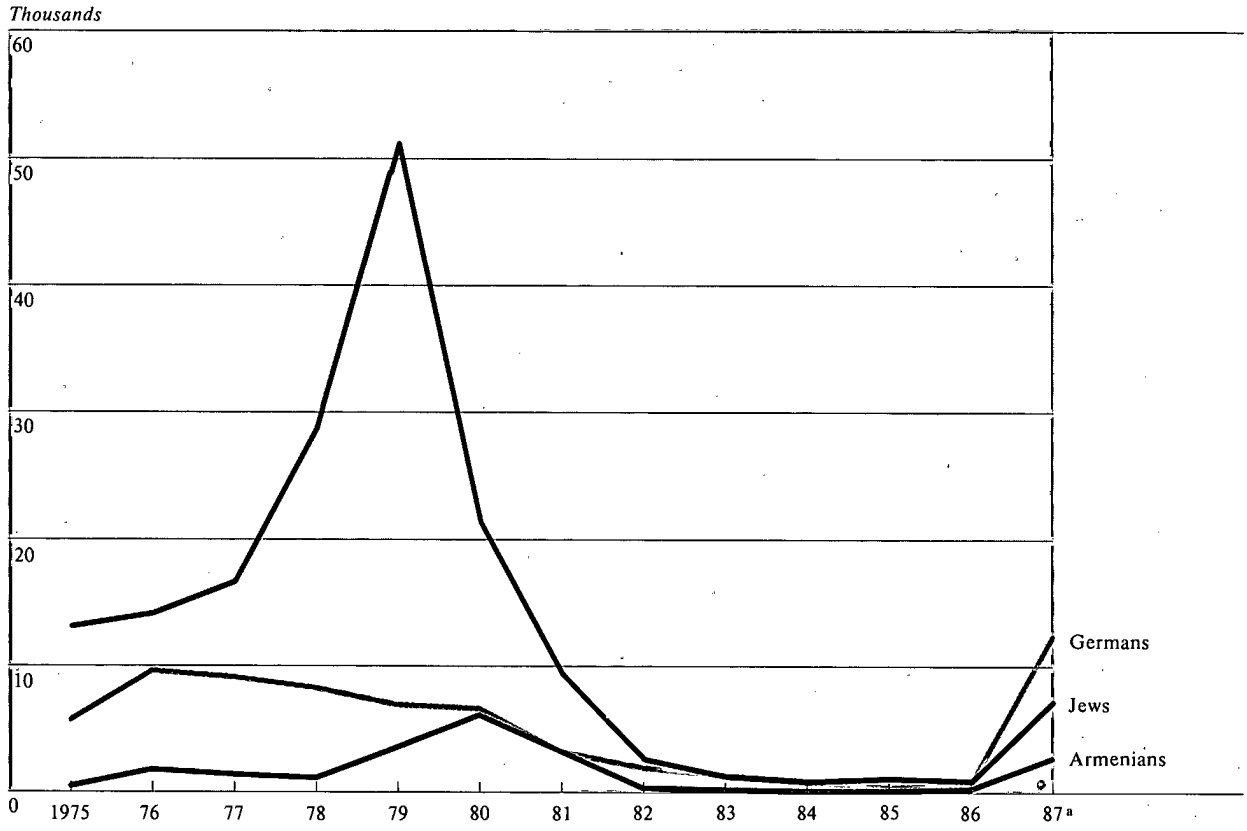
Figure 4
Emigration From the USSR, 1975-87



[a] January through November.

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changed tactics. While continuing to incarcerate or exile those whose aspirations are irreconcilable with even a reform-oriented Soviet regime—such as non-Russians favoring national secession from the USSR and religious groups seeking unrestricted freedom to proselytize—he is seeking to bring moderate critics into the mainstream.

Motives

Foreign policy considerations have played an important role in Gorbachev's evolving policy. Some of his early moves in late 1985 and the first half of 1986 to settle high-profile cases—such as the decision to release Anatoliy Shcharanskiy to the West—were

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especially calculated to appeal to foreign audiences. He and his key foreign policy advisers, like senior party secretary Aleksandr Yakovlev, are keenly aware of the role public opinion plays in shaping Western policy. They are trying to strip the West of the human rights "weapon" by relaxing repression internally and by shifting discussion in international human rights forums away from civil liberties in the USSR to the poverty, unemployment, and racism they claim are prevalent in Western countries.

Increasingly, however, domestic considerations appear paramount in Gorbachev's motivations. His changes in policy toward emigration and dissent are part of a broader effort to bring about a rapprochement between the party and the population—which he sees as necessary for maintaining the stability of the political system and revitalizing the economy.

Gorbachev's action on human rights reflects both concern about the extent to which the population became alienated politically during the Brezhnev years and confidence that the regime can reestablish its legitimacy by changing its policies. He clearly sees the need for bold initiatives to avert a political crisis but hopes he will be able to rebuild the regime's credibility by enlisting the population's support and forthrightly acknowledging the regime's weaknesses. He appears to believe a freer exchange of ideas and an end to "totalitarian" controls on information are necessary to foster the initiative and creativity on which scientific and technical progress depend.

Gorbachev's policies toward dissidents are especially designed to placate and win the support of the intelligentsia, whose backing is important to his economic modernization program. Many intellectuals have sympathized with the plight of dissidents such as Sakharov and see regime treatment of them as a barometer of Gorbachev's commitment to a reform course. According to a 1986 United States Information Agency (USIA) survey of elite perceptions, nearly half of Soviet artists and intellectuals are thought to concur with the view that "citizens who advocate 'human rights' are helping to improve our society."[1]

[1] To study elite perceptions, USIA asks Westerners who have had extensive recent contact with members of the Soviet elite—officials, intellectuals, and persons in the arts—to answer questions as they believe their Soviet contacts would answer.

In a similar 1983 survey, a majority of artists and over 30 percent of academics reportedly believed that "Andrey Sakharov had performed a service for Soviet society by speaking out for human rights." Gorbachev also undoubtedly realized that support for an end to egregious human rights abuses was not confined to the intelligentsia but reached into officialdom as well—especially within the generation of the elite who spent their politically formative years during Khrushchev's de-Stalinization rather than under Stalin or Brezhnev.

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Differentiated Approach

Gorbachev's statements suggest, however, that he has no intention of providing the population with guaranteed civil liberties or relinquishing the party's role of determining what constitutes legitimate criticism. In his speech to the January 1987 Central Committee plenum, for example, he called for an "organic combination of democracy and discipline" that has nothing in common with "permissiveness, irresponsibility, or anarchy"—codewords for Western concepts of individual freedom. He is trying to establish a dividing line between those who can be co-opted and those whose opposition to the regime is implacable.

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The limits of liberalization and the differentiated approach Gorbachev is employing can be seen in the scope of changes in emigration policy and the treatment of political prisoners:

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- Despite recent pardons of many political prisoners, the vast majority remain incarcerated in labor camps. Most pardons have applied to those convicted under only two of the more than 30 statutes used against dissenters. So far, the laws under which dissidents are convicted are still on the books.

- A few recently released dissenters have been briefly reincarcerated, underscoring the regime's continued leverage over dissidents. Recalcitrants, including organizers of recent anti-Russian demonstrations by minority nationalists, are being exiled abroad.

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- Although emigration has increased, the legal basis for denying emigration remains. The regime has adopted new standards for emigration that are even tougher, at least on paper.

Initial Gains

Gorbachev has made some headway in influencing the attitudes of the intelligentsia and even many dissidents. Some well-known dissidents have made cautious statements of support for Gorbachev's program, and dissonance is growing between those liberal intellectuals who believe *glasnost* should be tested and those who fear that demanding too much could jeopardize the advances made so far.

Gorbachev's human rights initiatives and overall reform program have also had tangible foreign policy benefits. High-ranking Soviet officials have remarked with satisfaction that Sakharov became a "nonstory" once he was allowed access to Western newsmen in Moscow. "Second Secretary" Yegor Ligachev, in remarks published in May in the authoritative party journal *Kommunist*, told Soviet media representatives that political changes made at the April 1985 Central Committee plenum, 27th Party Congress, and January 1987 plenum have made the USSR invulnerable to the West in terms of human rights issues.

Public opinion research in Western Europe indicates that the European image of the USSR has generally become more positive. In a poll conducted in nine European countries in late May 1987, two-thirds of the respondents said they have noticed a change for the better in the attitude of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev's leadership. Western opinion has been less generous concerning changes in human rights practices, however. Almost half the respondents in the May poll retained a negative view of the USSR's human rights policy.

Risks and Conservative Reaction

Gorbachev's human rights initiatives carry considerable political risks, however, for the relaxation of repression is generating broader demands on the regime:

- Religious and national minorities are becoming much more vocal in expressing grievances, many of which cannot be satisfied without changes that would undermine the foundations of Communist party rule. Baltic nationalists and Crimean Tatars have organized demonstrations involving thousands of participants. 25X1

- The rise of new forms of activism—by citizens who do not view themselves as dissidents but believe they are fulfilling Gorbachev's calls to become more involved in politics—is also a growing problem. Informal groups operating without official sanction are proliferating and attempting to engage in interest-group politics. Such groups have tried to get on the ballot for local council (soviet) elections. 25X1

- Human rights activists and special-interest groups have openly published unofficial journals. Unlike the underground groups involved in traditional samizdat, they have petitioned propaganda officials for approval and have published openly in spite of denials. 25X1

Fear of the destabilizing potential of Gorbachev's policies has galvanized opposition among conservative elites at all levels. Two conservative members of the leadership, Ligachev and KGB chief Viktor Chebrikov, have openly voiced concern that Gorbachev's policies are producing unacceptable consequences: 25X1

- Ligachev has publicly expressed his concern that people harboring hostile nationalist and religious ideas are exploiting *glasnost* and has warned of the "scum and debris" being washed up.

- In a major speech in September 1987, Chebrikov lashed out at the social unrest set loose by Gorbachev's human rights policy and claimed that the West will prey upon this opportunity to sow disorder in Soviet society. 25X1 25X1

Their principal concern—that *glasnost* is getting out of control, playing into the hands of foreign enemies, and stirring up non-Russian nationalities inside the USSR—is shared by many others in the political elite. Gorbachev's policies are generating particular

Figure 5. Crimean Tatars demonstrate at the entrance to Red Square in late July 1987.

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Figure 6. Latvians rally around the "freedom monument" in Riga on 23 August 1987.

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alarm within the police and KGB, whose job of maintaining internal security has become more difficult. A senior police investigator, in a letter to the editor published in *Pravda*, claimed that criticism of the law-and-order organs has bound the hands of the police, who are afraid of appearing too tough.

Setting Narrower Limits

There have been indications over the past several months that Gorbachev has agreed to setting narrower limits on dissent, either because of pressure from his colleagues or because he himself is concerned that demonstrations could get out of hand. Perhaps to deal with the concerns of the security organs, an implementation oversight committee for *perestroyka* and *glasnost* has been formed under Gorbachev's close ally Aleksandr Yakovlev consisting of the Minister of Internal Affairs, one of Chebrikov's deputies in the KGB, and the head of the armed forces' Main Political Directorate.

In late summer 1987, local authorities resumed the use of violence and intimidation against dissidents and refuseniks after having largely avoided these tactics earlier in the year. At least seven major cities, including Moscow and Leningrad, have adopted laws on demonstrations requiring advance permission from authorities, which is rarely granted.

Outlook

Gorbachev's ability to continue his human rights policies and his commitment to institutionalizing them can be gauged by the outcome of several impending policy decisions:

- A law that protects citizens who complain about official abuses by giving them the opportunity to raise their complaints in court takes effect in 1988, but it is unclear how liberally it will be interpreted.
- The current review of the criminal code will demonstrate how serious the regime is about changing or deleting the political articles used against dissenters and releasing more prisoners.
- A forthcoming law on the press will determine whether unofficial and politically controversial journals, like those begun by released prisoners, will be tolerated.
- A more widespread application of recent restrictions on public demonstrations could portend a significant crackdown on popular activism and choke off the first shoots of free speech and association.
- Intentions toward emigration over the longer term can be judged by the number of first-time applicants permitted to leave once the current extraordinary review of refusenik cases is completed.
- Willingness to allow dissidents to meet freely with foreign delegates or even participate in the proposed humanitarian affairs conference to be held in Moscow would be an important change in policy.

Gorbachev is attempting the monumental task of relaxing controls on dissent while keeping criticism within limits so that it neither threatens the regime's authority nor leads to the triumph of conservative reaction within the leadership. Although he has shown considerable skill in managing this process, his continued ability to do so is by no means ensured.

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